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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPARTMENT FOR WHA/CEN/BRIGHAM

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SUBJECT: PANAMA ELECTION COUNTDOWN #1: 12 WEEKS TO GO

Time is up

[1](#)1. (U) Monday, February 2, marked the deadline for political parties to register candidacies for presidential, mayoral, legislative and local representative seats. All parties complied with the deadline and despite rumors over the weekend that one would withdraw from the race; all four presidential candidates submitted their nominations. The Electoral Tribunal will soon publish a final, official list of all 12,278 candidates that will run for 1,754 elected positions.

Partido Liberal Autentico out

[1](#)2. (SBU) Electoral Tribunal President Eduardo Valdes officially announced that the hastily created Partido Liberal Autentico (PLA) will not be permitted to participate in the 2004 General Elections. As requested by Electoral Prosecutor Gerardo Solis, electoral magistrates will hold hearings to discuss alleged fraudulent membership registrations in the party. The PLA had already publicly endorsed PRD/PP presidential candidate Martin Torrijos. Torrijos was looking forward to PLA's official electoral recognition to A) form a 3-party coalition as the Arnulfistas have done; B) have Martin Torrijos' name appear a third time in the presidential ballot; C) receive \$1 million more on campaign subsidies; D) have more candidates campaigning for Torrijos at the local level.

First national debate

[1](#)3. (U) Following the closing time for official nominations, the largest local TV chain, MEDCOM (channels 4 & 13) held the first presidential debate (septel). Despite mixed feelings among the population about format and questions, the national consensus was that having such a debate was positive. At least two more debates are scheduled for March and April on other TV stations (channels 2 and 21).

Election results: the sooner the better

[1](#)4. (U) The President of the National Counting Board, Fausto Fernandez, announced that official results of the May 2 elections will be known around 11:00 p.m. that same day. Voting centers close at 4:00 p.m. and counting starts immediately after. Tally sheets will then be sent by electoral representatives to district counting boards. However, unofficial results for Panama City will be known by 7:00 p.m. since those counting boards are located nearby.

Candidate Torrijos meets former Colombian Presidents

[1](#)5. (U) PRD/PP presidential candidate Martin Torrijos in Bogota February 4 paid a courtesy call to former Colombian Presidents Alfonso Lopez Michelsen, Julio Turbay Ayala, and Ernesto Samper. Reportedly, they discussed regional topics, including Panama-Colombia border issues. Torrijos was accompanied by his first vice presidential candidate Samuel Lewis Navarro and his advisor, former Foreign Minister and Ambassador to Colombia Jorge Eduardo Ritter. The trip reflected long-standing ties between the PRD and Colombia's Liberal Party.

Everything under control, so far

[1](#)6. (SBU) Electoral Tribunal Magistrate Dennis Allen reported to Pol FSN that "things are going smoothly" in the electoral process so far. According to Allen, an Electoral Tribunal employee by mistake deleted an electronic nomination submitted by Partido Popular (PP). PP's President Ruben Arosemena publicly complained about it, but

the Electoral Tribunal has already informed him that the candidacy has been accepted.

Campaigning comes first

17. (SBU) A professional legislative staffer complained to Embassy about "how boring work is these days." Though the plenum at the Legislative Assembly is in recess, committees should have been meeting to discuss pending issues. According to this staffer, Legislative President "Jacobo Salas makes constant calls for committees to meet, but he is not successful. Not even those who are not campaigning are around. We expect a very quite session after March 1 as well," she ended. (Note: The Legislative Assembly reconvenes officially on March 1, 2004).

Can't get their act together

18. (SBU) An Arnulfista source involved in the Arnulfista presidential campaign privately shared with Embassy that "there is lack of communication and certainly little organization within Aleman's campaign. Competing with public disappointment with the GOP is a difficult task and we need as much coordination as possible." The source claimed that a new campaign strategy is to distance themselves from President Moscoso "who knows it already." The source cited Aleman's promise to abolish the transparency law regulations (passed by Moscoso) as a start. Embassy asked whether that stance would compromise Moscoso's support for the candidacy, the source said that "attacks will not be personal, but against things that the GOP has ignored doing." On party renovation, he said that after the elections a movement will promote current legislator Jose Blandon, Jr. to become the Arnulfista Party president in 2006, replacing Mireya Moscoso.

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